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First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement at the University of San Diego

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First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement

at the University of San Diego

Ashley Ortega

University of San Diego

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate first-generation college students (FGCS) and their campus connections. The overarching research question guiding my study was: How can I, as a FGCS, graduate student and future higher education educator create more accessible on-campus resources for undergraduate FGCS at USD? A secondary question was: In partnering with the first-generation stakeholders how can we better adapt our services to meet the needs of FGCS during their time at USD? Using Coghlan and Brannick's Cycles of Action Research as a guiding framework, I conducted one pre-cycle, a needs assessment, and three cycles of data collection: a survey, individual interviews with students, and a focus group. My findings suggest that students desire to be a part of programming participation, but they are hindered due to other obligations (i.e. commuting) and not having centralized information. As a result, I developed a set of recommendations to better meet the needs of FGCS.

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First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement
at the University of San Diego

When I first came to USD in 2018, I immediately noticed the lack of diversity and outreach the school was doing to reach first-generation college students (FGCS). Even my initial search on the USD website was a circle of never-ending clicks making it difficult for me, a graduate student, to find information. As a FGCS I still haven't found “my place” at the university. I cannot imagine the struggles that undergraduate FGCS are facing in terms of finding their sense of belonging through their overall college experience.

My research stems from my personal values for equity, advocacy and accessibility. I believe there are many things universities can do to better support these students, specifically at the University of San Diego (USD). While USD does support this subpopulation, it does not cater to all FGCS. As a result, I believe USD needs to be more intentional with their programming, by being aware of how FGCS are participating, analyzing what information and resources they are given, as well as recognizing that their experience is different because holding the FGCS identity comes with additional stressors and obstacles than those who do not identify as FGCS.

Purpose of the Study

As a future practitioner in student affairs, it is important for me to provide as much support as I can to all students, but even more so to FGCS. Thus, the goal of my action research project was to create programmatic change to assess and revise current recruiting strategies. Specifically, the overarching research question guiding my study was: How can I, as a FGCS, graduate student and future higher education educator create more accessible on-campus resources for undergraduate FGCS at USD? A secondary question was: In partnering with first-

generation stakeholders, how can student affairs better adapt our services to meet the needs of FGCS during their time at USD?

Literature Review

Coming into college as a FGCS can be very stressful and confusing. FGCS students may not have the appropriate tools and help to complete tasks that may seem self-explanatory, such as registering for classes. Not only do they not have the help they need, usually FGCS have familial obligations that prevent them from being more involved on campus and more engaged in their academics. Bello (2018) discusses how familial obligations and stress are an influencing factor in the FGCS college experience and how that may shift or determine how involved the student may be with the campus. Bello writes, “Not only do [] students have to deal with familial obligations and societal pressures, but they must also deal with other factors affecting their academic success, such as language barriers, lack of support, racial identity problems, poverty, and exposure to violence” (p. 9). These additional pressures and obligations create more stress on top of the course assignments. Thus, students may want to be more involved on campus, but because of the obligations they have at home they cannot be as involved as they may like. Furthermore, some students lack family support in terms of funding school. “First-generation college students are significantly less likely to graduate due to lack of family support, financial strains, poor academic preparation, and other barriers” (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011, p.55). Other students may simply feel disengaged and not want to participate in any on campus activities besides their required course and course work.

As Vincent Tinto (1990) describes in his model of students' departure, a student who does not achieve some level of academic or social integration is more likely to leave school (College Student Retention, n.d.). Unfortunately, FGCS from underrepresented backgrounds can face

additional issues related to their intersecting identities. “Social identities and their systemic oppression, such as classism, racism, and the intersectionality of these forms of oppression can also shape students’ sense of belonging in higher education” (Means & Pyne, 2017). This means that these underrepresented groups are more likely to struggle or feel “un-welcomed” due to their identity. Many of the students may not feel a sense of belonging because the campus life/community did not resemble their home community. Student connectedness should be made inside and outside of the classroom. Course content matters and if students don’t identify or learn about things they relate to can decrease their academic engagement. “College is a very intense time of self- discovery, asking deep questions of purpose, finding a sense of belonging, and building an understanding of the world around them” (Serrano, 2014). If students aren’t finding their sense of belonging it can lead to feeling disconnected and possibly a higher dropout rate.

As the numbers of first-generation college students increase in universities so do the concerns for the population. Sharon Parks (2011) stated that there are many modes of meaning-making, which include:

“(1) becoming critically aware of one's own composing reality, (2) self-consciously participating in an ongoing dialogue towards truth, and (3) cultivating a capacity to respond -- to act -- in committed and satisfying ways” (Parks, 2011, p.12).

If students aren’t exploring this “making meaning” they may feel disconnected and even isolated from their campus experience; “[w]hen students are not as engaged in college, their overall experiences can be isolating and disconnecting; unfortunately, these challenges can be magnified when students enroll at large research universities” (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) claim that, “students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty,

staff and other students have repeatedly been shown to be independent predictors of student persistence” (p.408).

My research explores undergraduate first-generation college students (FGCS) and their campus connections at USD. Since there are several definitions of first-generation college students, I clarify how my definition differs from USD’s definition in Table 1. My hope is that with this research, USD, a predominantly White institution, can help better serve these students and improve engagement and overall student experience. “Although the numbers of racial and ethnic minority students attending predominantly White colleges and universities continue to increase, the culture or climate of these campuses continues to complicate their path toward graduation” (Gonzalez, p.194, 2002). USD already has existing programming, but I want to know how can we improve our outreach to FGCS?

Table 1

Definition of First-Generation College Student

Source	Definition
University of San Diego (USD)	At the time you completed high school or high school equivalency, your custodial parent(s) or legal guardian(s) had not earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. This means you are the first to attend a 4-year college/university and obtain a bachelor's degree.
Personal	A student who is the first in their immediate family to receive a degree (Bachelor’s or Master’s) in the United States.

Methodology

The methodological approach that I used in my research was Coghlan and Brannick action research cycle (See Figure 1). There are four steps to this approach: diagnosing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action. In phase one, diagnosing is identifying the issue. Phase two, planning action, is exploring possible solutions. Phase three, taking action, is implementing possible solutions. Lastly, phase four, evaluating, is assessing the implemented actions. Using this method framework will allow me to reflect on an individual level as well as the student participation.

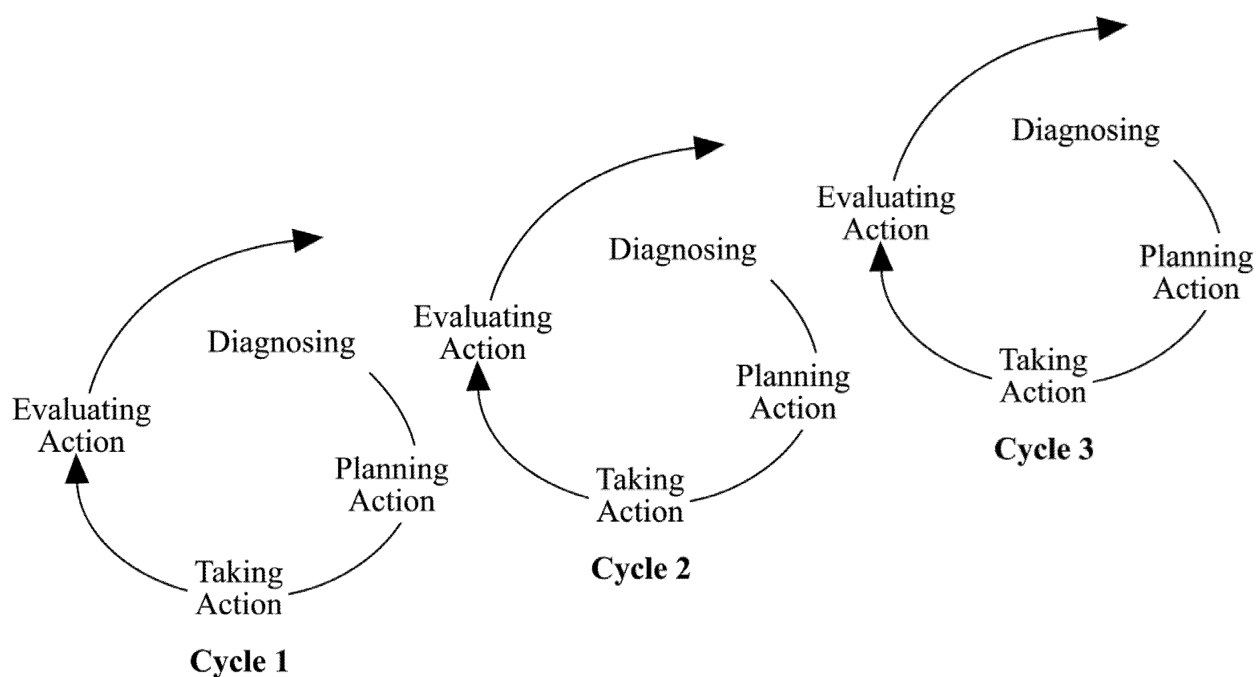


Figure 1. Coghlan and Brannick Action Research Cycle

When I began this research, I did not work at the institution or even within higher education. Thus, I was worried that I would be seen as an outsider. I was also concerned my personal experience as a FGCS would interfere with the research process. I wondered how different the challenges, that other FGCS faced, would be from mine. I also didn't know how receptive the FGCS community would be of the changes I wanted to implement. Because my

FGCS identity was very important to me I designed my research to use using both qualitative and quantitative methods to help give me a “third-person” voice to the research. Ade-Ojo & Sowe (2011) write:

Unlike traditional research which tended to focus on the ‘third person’ (p.5), this research was designed to incorporate the voices of both the first and second persons. For us the first person is ourselves as practitioners, and as Coghlan and Brannick (p.6) suggest, this research has enabled us to travel ‘downstream’ such that we could ‘inquire into our behaviour, ways of relating and action in the world’. The second person voice reflects the ability to work with others on issues of mutual interest (p.505).

This approach helped me understand the FGCS experience as more than data. Since some of the limitations I identified were biases in evaluating what was important and what needed change, the primary strength of my chosen method was that it helped me systematically self-reflect so I could make changes as needed (cycle 1 influenced cycle 2, cycle 2 influenced cycle 3, etc.).

Context

This study took place at The University of San Diego (USD) which is a private Catholic institution in San Diego, California. USD has over 9,070 undergraduate, paralegal, graduate, and law students enrolled with 38 percent identifying minority students (University of San Diego, 2018). Additionally, in 2018 about 18% of undergraduate students identified as first-generation according to Hoffman (2019). Since USD does not have a physical space or center that caters to only FGCS, I engaged with the undergraduate first-generation college students at USD through the first-generation student association, first-generation task force, and other additional campus stakeholders.

Participants

There were a total of six participants for this research. Out of those six participants, five identified as a FGCS and one did not identify as a FGCS. The participants were undergraduate students who ranged in academic standing from Sophomore to Senior standing. The participants were recruited through flyer marketing (Appendix A), email recruitment (Appendix B) and through word of mouth. Initially, I only recruited students who I knew already shared the FGCS identity, but then I realized I wanted to cater to more than those in my “bubble”. I also decided to continually recruit participants through the previously mentioned modes and asking participants to pass my information along to others that may be interested to join my study. Each participant was provided a consent form that outlined important resources, the purpose of study and contact information to my advisor and myself (Appendix C). Even though I provided the written consent form I also made sure to give a brief oral overview of my purpose and what participating in this research means. Additionally, to preserve anonymity I assigned participant numbers (i.e. participant #1, participant #2, etc.) to students and they will be referred to as such throughout my paper.

Cycle Descriptions & Findings

This study was made up of one pre-cycle and three cycles. The pre-cycle was gathering staff/campus connection information to get more insight as to what initiatives USD already had in place. The first cycle was a digital survey that was completed by six students. The second cycle was a series of individual interviews that was completed by four students; one student was not responsive after completing the initial survey and the other did not identify as a FGCS. The third and last cycle was a group interview.

Pre-Cycle: Needs Assessment

Diagnosing. As a FGCS myself, I have first-hand experience with the gaps within the available university support. Coming to USD, I thought it would be easier to find resources because I already had a college degree, but I struggled just as much or even more than I did when I was an undergraduate student. On multiple occasions, I tried to look up resources that were available to me on the USD website and I either hit a wall or ended up in a never-ending cycle of link clicking. The resources available were minimal and most of the posted workshops and events were very outdated so I knew I needed to reach out to people on the USD campus.

Planning Action. I wanted to understand the campus culture surrounding FGCS. I figured since I needed a research supervisor and I did not work on campus, I would also take that time to reach out and get to know what other staff members were doing. In this phase, I emailed multiple department heads and the First-Generation Student Organization (See Appendix D). At the time when I was doing these informational interviews I felt very frustrated and confused. I did not intentionally plan a pre-cycle and after speaking with my first staff member, I fell into a referral loop. Even though I felt stuck, I eventually realized these conversations were helping me structure my research.

Taking Action. The first staff member I met with was hesitant to “sign-off” on potentially being my research supervisor. Although they offered a lot of insight given that they work with FGCS, their overall function was the TRIO program and student support services. After speaking with them, they sent a virtual introduction via email to a second staff member.

The second staff member I spoke with was also a part of the center for student success. They spoke to me about their FGCS identity and their efforts on campus. This is where I heard about the First-Generation Action Team. This team meets monthly to sustain campus wide

support to FGCS. I was surprised that I had not heard about this team given that it was open to all students, faculty and staff. This conversation led me to be a part of the action team.

The third staff member, who agreed to be my research supervisor, was part of the action team and provided me with several resources. They introduced me to an undergraduate student intern from First-Generation Student Initiatives and gave me data from previous surveys sent out. They also made it clear that they could be my “go-to”. I didn’t feel brushed off or as if I was going to end up back in the never-ending loop referral. I got answers, support and feedback.

Finally, I met with the intern for First-Generation Student Initiatives, who created the First-Generation Student Organization. The First-Generation Student Association’s (FGSA) mission is to establish a support system, provide services and workshops, foster a sense of community, and encourage pride for the First-Generation College Students at the University of San Diego (University of San Diego, 2019). When I met with the undergraduate student intern, they were very excited about my work given that they had already previously worked with another graduate student on their research.

Lastly, I was also able to attend multiple action team meetings. The action team met on the third Thursday of every month and they were open to all undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The purpose of the action team was:

“The First-Gen Action Team is a cross-divisional collaboration tasked with creating and sustaining campus-wide efforts to proactively engage and support USD's First-Generation college students while at USD and post-graduation. In addition, we strive to attain retention and graduation rates equal to, or greater than, the USD average. (University of San Diego, 2020)”

I attended meetings over the course of five months. In those meetings, I was able to bring the graduate student perspective and speak about the missing links USD had with FGCS. From the meetings I attended I learned that all attendees wanted to push initiatives for bettering the FGCS experience.

Evaluating Action. At first when I was doing informational interviews it didn't occur to me that I was already in a pre-cycle for my research. After reflecting on my epiphany, I wondered if I had similar feelings to those other FGCS face when navigating higher education. The resources were there, but I did not have concrete answers on where to get help. I felt overwhelmed and experienced the broken system first-hand. When I finally made my way to the First-Gen Action Team meetings, it made me happy to realize that important conversations were happening around providing support for FGCS.

Cycle 1: Survey

Diagnosing. After my conversations with individuals from my pre-cycle, I wanted to reach out to students to get their perspectives. If I was experiencing turmoil in trying to get a research supervisor, I wanted to find out who our FGCS are and if they were experiencing similar situations. I wanted to start by doing a demographic survey so that it could later help me in doing multiple 1:1 interviews. In doing 1:1 interviews I could get more in depth perspective of FGCS personal experiences.

Planning Action. The first cycle of my research was a 10-question online survey (Appendix E) that helped me identify the demographics of my potential participants. This short survey was intended to identify FGCS participants, whether they lived on or off campus, the highest level of education for their mother/father, and a list of any organizations they may be a

part of. I wanted this survey to be short and to function as a “screening” for interviews for Cycle 2.

Taking Action. Students received this survey via email from either myself or staff members who forwarded it along to students that identified or had participated in FGCS events. Initially I predicted that most of my participants would be members of the First-Generation Student Association, however, that was not the case. Overall, my findings showed 50% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 16.7% identified as Asian, 16.7% identified as Caucasian, 16.7% identified as Middle Eastern (see Table 2). Furthermore, parental education level varied widely (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

Participant #	Gender	Age	Race	Class Standing
Participant 1	Male	24	Hispanic/Latinx	Junior
Participant 2	Male	19	Hispanic/Latinx	Sophomore
Participant 3	Female	20	Asian	Sophomore
Participant 4	Female	21	Caucasian	Senior
Participant 5	Male*	29	Middle Eastern	Senior
Participant 6	Male	19	Hispanic/Latinx	Sophomore

*Did not identify as a FGCS

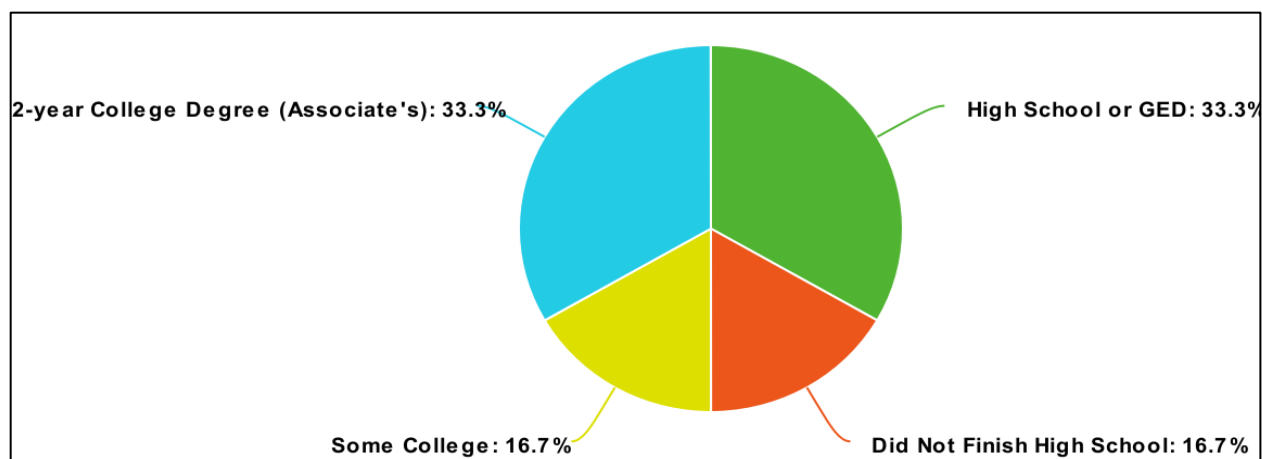


Figure 2. Mother's Highest Level of Education

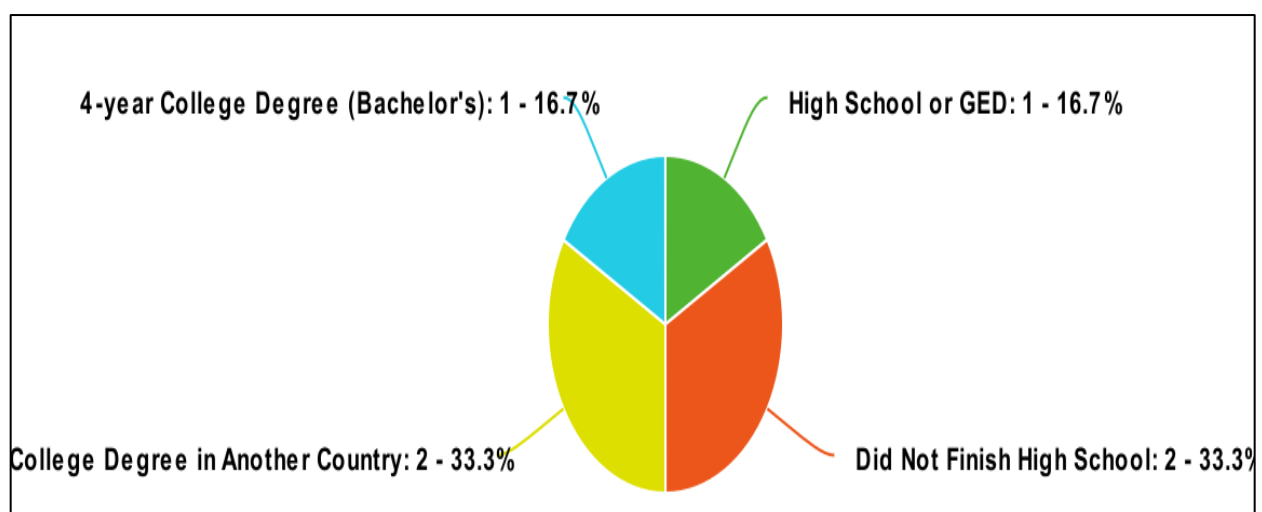


Figure 3. Father's Highest Level of Education

Evaluating Action. At first, I felt really discouraged that only six participants submitted the survey. It was frustrating seeing the need for FGCS outreach and limited results on a survey intended to help better serve them. I had reached out to multiple staff members to get the word out and I met with the founder of the First-Generation Student Organization, yet only one member from the group participated. Since this research was something I was passionate about, I began to experience feelings of imposter syndrome; it made me question *Am I qualified to do this research? Do I know what I'm doing? Will this be valuable? Do students care? Do they know*

how to find resources? I went in a downward spiral because I felt like my research was failing. After talking to my research supervisor, she gave me a reality check and said that six participants were a good number to start with for my research since I had variation of age, race and class standing. After talking to her, I realized I was in a good spot and could have meaningful conversations with those who participated as well as still have an ongoing recruitment.

A surprising finding was that a student that did not identify as a FGCS submitted the survey. It was a specific question in my survey, and it made me question how students define FGCS. It was my assumption that this person who filled out the survey heard about this research through word of mouth but didn't realize it was centralized to FGCS or they did not know what FGCS meant. Thus, what I learned from this survey was that I needed to ask my participants in the phone interviews what a FGCS means to them given the differing parental levels of education.

Cycle 2: Individual Interviews

Diagnosing. After the first cycle, I decided I wanted to do individual interviews with students. I wanted them to share their individual stories and their experience with the identity of FGCS. The important part for me during this stage was to listen closely and ask questions about their beliefs, experiences and desire for change in order to get a deeper understanding of who they are as individuals.

Planning Action. After submission of the survey in cycle two, I recruited cycle two participants through email by asking if they were interested in participating in an individual interview. I had originally planned to do in-person interviews for this portion, however due to COVID-19 restrictions, I was unable to do so. Instead, I conducted phone interviews that

consisted of a 9-question questionnaire (Appendix E). These interviews were conducted over a two-week time frame.

Taking Action. Out of the six students who participated in the initial online survey, only four students agreed to participate in the second phase of the research. The first question I asked was to have them define what a FGCS was. Participant #1 was a male identifying, junior standing, transfer student. When he was asked to submit the initial survey, he had to look up what this term meant. He didn't know that he was a FGCS because that was the first time he had heard that term. He later defined it as the first one in your family to attend a 4-year university in the United States, he specifically added that point because his father attended college in Mexico, but felt he was a FGCS because schooling was different in both countries. Participant #2 was a male identifying, sophomore standing student. He identified FGCS as someone who has one or more parents who have not attended a traditional four-year university. Participant #3 was a female identifying, sophomore standing student. She identified it as someone whose parents didn't graduate with a bachelor's degree. Someone whose parent went to community college and got associate degree could still be considered a FGCS. Participant #4 was a female identifying, senior standing student. She identified FGCS as someone who is first in their family to go to college.

The second question I asked was regarding college preparedness, I asked this question because in my experience and in my review of literature. I found that students who identified as FGCS usually feel underprepared when trying to navigate college. Three out of the four participants felt they were prepared to come to the university in terms of the "life skills" side as opposed to the academic side. Participant #2 expressed:

I felt very prepared when it came to "life skills" but felt quite unprepared when it came

to academics and professional development. On the life skills, I was taught how to do laundry, save money, and knowing how to handle life tasks. Regarding my academic and professional preparation, I immediately noticed my peers were miles ahead of me. Everyone around me had a resume, were applying to internships, research positions, scholarships and knew which connections to make. I felt extremely overwhelmed by this and had to adjust quickly.

More than one student expressed similar feelings of being “behind” and not knowing what help they need or how to get it. Participant #1 said he had no idea what financial aid or units were, and their biggest challenge was not knowing a lot and having to educate yourself and family. Another student mentioned similar concerns. Participant #4 shared, “This is new me and to my parents and they think you know everything. It's hard to be the sole “knower” of university levels.” This outlier in this phase was participant #3. She felt very prepared because she was part of the Student Support Services Summer Bridge Program that gave her resources and spoke about ways to get involved on campus. According to the student, this program happened the week before school started. She shared, “If it wasn't for that program I would be lost, I know because of it I know resources that others don't.”

Finally, given that my research is focused on USD and programming participation I asked students to identify how (if so) USD's campus involvements help cater to their identity as a FGCS. Out of the four students only two were involved in campus organizations. Student #4 saw an unbalance and how shorthanded USD was in catering to FGCS and sought a sense of belonging through campus organizations. Student #2 is involved in approximately four organizations and knew from the start that she wanted to be involved.

“I wanted to be involved on campus specifically in multicultural organizations, I knew

coming to a PWI I wanted to be close to my identity. Some of the other groups I am involved with I had no intention of joining, but fell in love with. USD gave me the opportunity to explore more.”

Student #4 felt similar to student #2, she knew that the more she was involved the more access she would have to explore “USD programming is so helpful, it isn't just a resource they have people with the same experiences as me.”

On the opposite spectrum, student #1 is not involved and is a commuter student. He frequently mentioned that being a commuter student didn't give him any time to participate in organizations; “I take public transportation so I don't stay late on campus. The only space I use is the commuter commons”. Student #3 said he wanted to join organizations, but “I definitely felt slightly out of place there, as most of my peers were not first-generation and had a clear vision of what to do in college.”

Evaluating Action. Given all these variations of FGCS definitions, it's no wonder universities have different definitions. It's difficult to centralize what it truly means, but it makes me wonder what if the university definition doesn't apply to you, are you still a FGCS? To me personally, I would answer this question with yes, but I'm not sure the university would agree.

Overall, the trend that I noticed in this cycle was that the students that were more involved on campus felt like they were exploring their identities and felt that USD was catering to their experience as a FGCS. The other half of the students felt the opposite. When I gave them examples or organizations (like the action team and student organization) they didn't know they even existed. Those students felt it was a challenge trying to figure out everything by themselves., Resources were there but they must actively look for them since they aren't just readily available. They specifically mentioned having trouble with 1) Financial aid, loans, and

applying for FAFSA; 2) Navigating college when you have no familial support to ask for help; and 3) Not knowing how to explain organizations are a part of the student life to their families.

These were some of the same things I felt as an undergraduate student, but I luckily was a student that was involved and was able to find resources on my own.

After this cycle, I felt a mix of emotions. I was heart-broken because I know what it's like trying to explain to family members what student organizations are and having difficulty explaining and even translating it to another language. On the other hand, it made me very excited that some students did know about resources. Nevertheless, at the end of the conversations I got the same conclusions: "it could be better". Given the variations in answers, I was intentional about the focus for my group interview.

Cycle 3: Group Interview

Diagnosis. After concluding my second cycle I noticed many emerging themes within the individual interviews. Some being: familial support, preparedness, campus involvement & programming participation. At the end of my phone interview with participant #4, she asked why graduate students had First-Generation Dialogues and those weren't offered to undergraduates. Seeing that this was a need, I decided to do a semi-structured group dialogue where students can go over the intersecting identities they share. This group interview was intended to be done in person, but on the day it was originally planned the COVID-19 stay at home order was placed. As a result, the focus group became a virtual interview through Zoom that lasted around an hour (See Appendix G). While I anticipated to have more student participants, only three participants were able to attend.

Planning Action. For this cycle I asked participants to do a maze activity. They were given the instructions to create a maze outline (with beginning and end), inside of the maze write

some barriers that may prevent you from attaining your goals (i.e. race, gender, stress, institutional support, etc.) and lastly their goals (See Figure 4). The participants wrote their own words and phrases which they recognized as barriers and later shared to the entire group. During the sharing activity if other participants identified with the same barrier, they were able to add on to their maze as they were shared. The second section of the discussion revolved around identifying and defining imposter syndrome. In this section I showed them a short video and asked a series of questions.

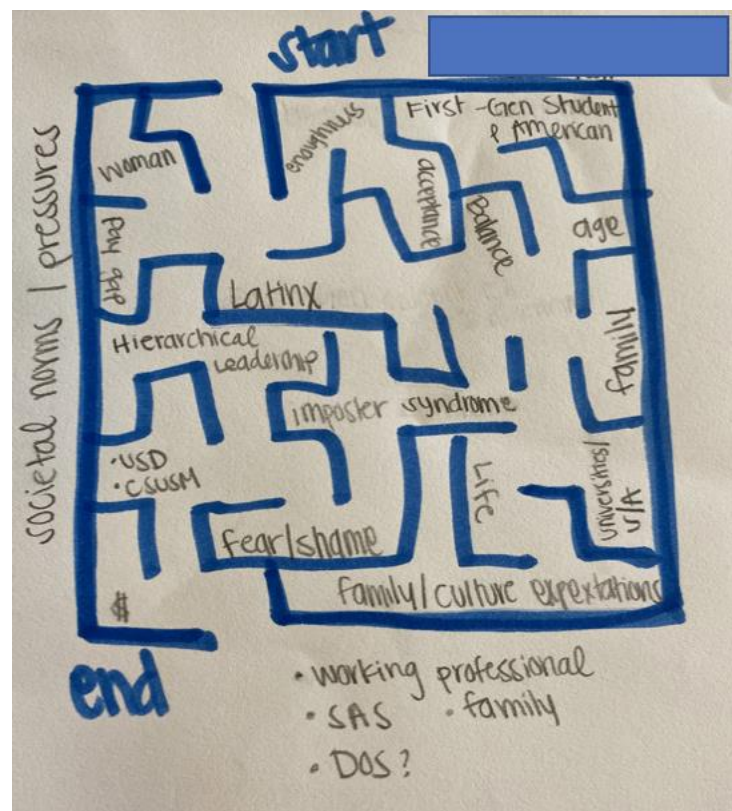


Figure 4. Maze Example

Taking Action. Out of the four students who expressed interest in follow up interviews (participants #1-#4), only three contributed to this cycle; participant #1, participant #3 and participant #4. I began this session by doing introductions and assuring them that what was discussed would remain confidential and would not be discussed in detail outside of the meeting.

Once everyone agreed I started the first activity, the maze drawing, where I also participated. I figured if I am wanting vulnerability to be shared, I also had to contribute. After they completed their drawing, I asked them why those barriers stood out to them? Some words or phrases that were shared are shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Word Cloud

Participant #1 stated “these are my barriers because not knowing a lot you have to educate yourself and family. This is a new experience and my parents think I know everything. It's hard to be the sole “knower” of university levels. It’s hard connecting my school and home life.” Participant #2 and #4 agreed. They both stated similar sentiments around not being able to explain what it is they do at school. Specifically, participant #2 who is also a part of Greek life shared not knowing how to bring something so important to her into her family life. She explained, “they think I’m paying for friends. Greek life is a huge part of my life and my family has no idea what I’m talking about”.

When we moved on to the imposter syndrome section, two out of the three participants had never heard of the word or knew what it meant. When I shared the video (TED-Ed 2018), participants #1 and participant #3 said it helped them understand so much; “I never knew what this was, and it makes so much sense now. I feel guilty celebrating myself and I never feel good enough.” Participant #4 said “I’ve known about this term for a while now and it’s always in the back of my head. Even when I’m involved in organizations, I never feel like I’m doing enough.”

Evaluating Action. Although I was able to interview students virtually, I feel as if I did not have the same effect as I could have had it been in person. It was difficult to get the students to share their stressors or frustrations and simply be vulnerable when I’m sure they also have family at home. This also made me wonder why participant #2, who seemed to be very excited about this phase, did not join us at all.

Even though I did not get more participants I feel that the conversations I had with these students was very rich and meaningful. It reminded me a lot of my personal experiences and how similar they were. I found myself constantly saying “you’re not alone in this” because I wish someone would had said that to me when I was experiencing self-doubt and imposter syndrome. I was in their shoes not that long ago and I still experience imposter syndrome at work and in the classroom.

This last cycle really made me do a lot of self-reflection and inner work that I wasn’t anticipating. Usually after my cycles I tried to analyze my data and start grouping items, this time around I just needed a moment to pause and recognize my feelings. Graduating from college never took away my feelings of self-doubt and now being a graduate student, I feel the same pressures I did as an undergraduate.

So, this brought me to question, when is enough enough? Or what is enoughness? As participant #4 shared, she goes to programs, but she still feels the need to do more and be more involved. I have felt the same frequently both as an undergraduate student and graduate student. From my personal experience, I always feel like I have to validate or prove that I am “enough”, but I don’t know if I am wanting to prove it to myself or to others. These reflections stumped me and made me ask myself “*why do I do this to myself and why do I downplay my successes?*” I’ve spent a lot of time trying to reassure others and help them realize how valuable they are and yet I haven’t been doing that with myself. This final cycle gave me a lot more than I thought I would get.

Challenges & Limitations

During this research, I have faced multiple challenges ranging from administrative to student support. The specific challenges and limitations I had stemmed for issues with my research supervisor and advisors, as well as issues stemming from COVID-19.

Research Supervisor & Advisors

The first two challenges I faced with this research were in my proposal phase. The first was finding a research supervisor. I struggled finding a campus partner/supervisor so that my research could take place. I spoke to over a dozen of peers, staff and administrators. I kept getting referred to other people/ I felt as if I was being passed off because USD had no specific space for FGCS. It wasn’t until I spoke with two FGCS identifying staff members that I felt like this research could be done. They were both amazing resources and I was finally able to secure permission to do this research.

Secondly, I had frequent changes in advisors over the course of a couple of months due to faculty changes. Before I submitted my Institutional Review Board (IRB) application to get

approval to conduct my research, I went through three different advisors. The first advisor I had was an adjunct professor who could not be my permanent advisor given their adjunct status. My next advisor was a long-standing professor within SOLES. However, the department later realized this professor had too many students to advise. I was in limbo for a couple of months with my IRB application mostly ready to be submitted. Specifically, during this summertime period, I received an email for the department wanting to know the status of my submission given that it had been drafted in the IRB system for about three months. I responded to the email stating that I did not have an advisor and once I was assigned one I would be able to submit it. Unfortunately, I did not receive any notification but when I checked the system I realized my advisor had been changed once again. Fortunately, I finally received a permanent advisor and was able to get very meaningful feedback with someone who had a lot of prior knowledge of FGCS. Unfortunately, due to all the changes in advisors, I was not able to get approval from IRB until October of 2019. Thus, my research timeline was pushed back.

COVID-19

In January 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in the United States. As a result, the U.S. is currently in a global pandemic where we must follow state and nationwide restrictions. In March 2020, San Diego County received a stay at home order where only essential employees could work. This meant that physical classes were suspended, and other restrictions were implemented. Some of those restrictions being: social distancing and no more than a certain amount of people in the same room (unless they are in quarantine together). Given these new restrictions, my research did not occur as planned through my original timeline. Many of my original participants did not respond to my communication efforts because USD as a whole was transitioning to online learning and dealing with bigger things. As a result,

participation decreased. On the day my focus group was going to be conducted, USD shut down all in person events with more than ten people and two days later a “stay-at-home” order was place in San Diego County. COVID-19 pushed my already delayed timeline by a couple of more weeks, making my final phase very difficult to complete. What’s more important in this pandemic is that students and families are dealing with basic needs issues and as a student myself there were times when my academics and research were not my priority. My priority was my family and my own safety and wellbeing. As a result, I don’t blame students for not showing interest or showing less interest in “other” things. Nevertheless, as a part of the Graduate Student Council, my team and I have been focusing on student needs and allocating part of our budget to help students who don’t have resources. It’s been an interesting time to conduct research and to say that COVID-19 has been a limitation is an understatement.

Recommendations

USD doesn’t have much resources for FGCS and the things that are available are either not being marketing well enough or minimal. While the USD first-generation website has a section of staff that identifies as FGCS, there isn’t any current events or additional on campus resources. The most relevant resources are off campus/community resources and USD needs to implement more “in-house” changes. Thus, my recommendations focus on Education on FGCS Identity & Definition Change, a mentor program, and FGCS Conversations for Undergraduates.

Education on FGCS Identity & Definition Change

When speaking to students, some didn’t even know what a FGCS was or that it was a part of their identity. Outreach programs aren’t fulfilling all FGCS needs because students are still lost even while having “access.” To better help FGCS, we must help them develop their identity by starting to redefine and create a more inclusive definition of how USD defines FGCS.

In addition, there should be a workshop or training for faculty and staff to recognize when a FGCS may be struggling and knowing what struggles this identity can bring. Faculty has the option of disclosing whether they identify as FGCS. Having a professor or an ally with knowledge of this experience can help students feel supported and heard.

Lastly, there needs to be more large-scale appreciation for FGCS. I know the task force has been working on this and it can be difficult given this was the first year they did “first-gen week”, but the same student that was involved (participant #3) didn’t know this had already happened. This needs to be a university wide effort that is acknowledged by all campus partners.

Mentor Program

All the participants (including the SSS participant), suggested a structured mentorship program should be established. According to participant #3, not all applicants of SSS get into the program and it puts those who don’t participate at a disadvantage. There should be a FGCS cross-campus partnership where peers can help other peers. I specifically believe this program should mirror SOLES student mentorship program, where students get partnered with those who share similar interests other than the FGCS identity. Mentors and mentees can seek opportunities and rely on one another without the stigma of asking for help. This can provide an opportunity for holistic growth and identity development.

FGCS Conversations for Undergraduates

As a graduate student, I have been lucky to have been invited to first-gen dialogues through graduate student life. These conversations are student led and hold space for FGCS. My recommendation is that a similar program should also be offered to undergraduate students. Faculty and staff support is needed, but student peer support is essential. Personally, once I knew others shared similar feelings and fears as me it made me feel like this was all okay. Participant

#4 accidentally attended one of these dialogues thinking it was catering to all students, but later realized that was not the case. After having attended the program she exclaimed, “why don’t we have this?” Undergraduates need the same space to hold these conversations especially even more that USD does not have a physical space that caters to only FGCS.

Conclusion

First-generation college students are already a huge portion of students that make up universities. The results of this research suggest that these students desire to be a part of programming participation, but it is hindered due to other obligations, such as commuting, and not having centralized information. Students who weren’t involved and wanted to be stated not knowing where to look and often feeling left out. Students who were involved felt a greater sense of community and found it easier to get access to specific resources they may need.

My research suggests that USD can be doing more to help FGCS cultivate what this identity means. There is a need for more outreach to FGCS about existing programming. Specifically, USD needs create spaces for students to do self-work surrounding their identity as well as explore barriers FGCS face when navigating college. Ultimately, there needs to be more action since FGCS are one of the most marginalized groups on campus. Having conversations about this student identity isn’t enough anymore. We need action. The time for implementation is now.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

ARE YOU A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT?

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Approximate time commitment if participating in all sessions: 2 hours & 15 minutes

I am conducting an action research study about First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement at the University of San Diego and I need your input!

PARTICIPATE IN:

- INITIAL SURVEY
- GROUP INTERVIEWS
- ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS
- MAKING A CHANGE

For more information email
ashleyortega@sandiego.edu



Appendix B: Recruitment Email for Students

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ashley Ortega and I am a second-year in the M.A. Higher Education Leadership program. I am in the beginning stages of my action research project based on First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement at the University of San Diego. I am emailing to ask if you would like to take about 15 minutes to complete a survey for this research project. Participation is completely voluntary and your answers will be anonymous. Upon submitting the survey please identify if you would like to participate in one-on-one or group interviews the approximate participation time will be an additional two hours.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at ashleyortega@sandiego.edu. Thank you for your time.

Ashley Ortega
M.A. Candidate
University of San Diego

Appendix C: Research Participant Consent Form

**University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:
First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement at the University of San Diego

I. Purpose of the research study

Ashley Ortega is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to conduct an examination of undergraduate first-generation college students (FGCS) and their campus connections at the University of San Diego (USD). With this project, I want to research how student affairs professionals at USD might create spaces for students to do self-work surrounding their identity as well as explore barriers FGCS face when navigating college.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Complete one questionnaire that asks about age, ethnicity, identity and family.
- Participate in a focus group discussion about how USD is catering to the First-generation college students' needs
- Participate in a private interview about your experience of being an undergraduate first-generation college students at USD.
- You will be audio recorded during this interview.

Your participation in this study will take approximately a total of 135 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the FGCS experience at USD.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name).

Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide **will** be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and used in future research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades.

You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Ashley Ortega

Email: ashleyortega@sandiego.edu

Phone: 619-213-6097

2) Nydia C. Sánchez

Email: nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu

Phone: 619-260-8839

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix D: Pre-Cycle Recruitment Email

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Ashley Ortega I am a first-year in the M.A. Higher Education Leadership program. I was referred to you by many students given your passion for first-generation college students. I would love to talk to you about my action research project. Attached below will be my abstract and possibly partner up. Please let me know your availability.

Thank you in advance,
Ashley

Attachment Enclosed:

First Generation College Students' Connection to Campus Involvement at the University of San Diego

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to conduct an examination of undergraduate first-generation college students (FGCS) and their campus connections. Navigating college for the first time can be a very stressful and confusing process. FGCS from underrepresented backgrounds can face an additional plethora of issues as opposed to those who don't identify as FGCS.

With this project, I want to research how student affairs professionals at the University of San Diego (USD) might create spaces for students to do self-work surrounding their identity as well as explore barriers FGCS face when navigating college. I hope to provide insight into the FGCS experience at a predominantly white institution (PWI).

The main themes I will explore are student experience (connectedness, college success, and retention), familial and institutional support, and programming and program participation. I anticipate that through this research USD will be able to change their practices with outreach for FGCS and create more accessible resources for FGCS.

Appendix E: Online Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. Do you identify as a First-Generation College Student?
4. What race/ethnicity do you identify with?
5. What is your class standing?
6. Do you live on or off campus?
7. Highest level of education: Mother?
8. Highest level of education: Father?
9. Please list any organizations that you are involved with at USD?
10. Anything else you would like to share?

Appendix F: Phone Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of First-Generation College Student?
2. How prepared did you feel when coming to college?
 - a. Speak to some specific instances?
3. What have you found to be the biggest challenges you have faced as a First-Generation College Student?
 - a. How has USD contributed or relieved these challenges?
 - b. What, if any, are some influencing factors of these challenges?
4. Define sense of belonging.
5. How has USD fostered a sense of belonging for First-Generation College Student?
6. When coming to USD, did you consider pursuing on-campus involvements?
7. How has USD help catered to your First-Generation College Student identity?
8. How has USD hindered exploration of your First-Generation College Student identity?
9. Anything else you would like to share?

Appendix G: Group Interview Agenda

Introductions (15 minutes)

- Who is in the room?
- What identities do we share?

Activity (25 minutes)

- Commonalities of 1:1 interviews
- Differences among 1:1 interviews
- Definitions of terms
 - i.e. FGCS, sense of belonging, imposter syndrome

Sharing Out (15 minutes)

- Reflection of activity

Closing Thoughts (5 minutes)

- Questions, comments, concerns?